Appendix B:

LEAP Survey of Community Stakeholders

To examine how engagement plays out among Asian Americans, LEAP conducted a survey of staff and leadership within Asian American community organizations. Participants in LEAP's Civic Engagement Conferences, as well as recipients of the LEAP e-newsletter, were asked to provide their opinions of issues related to civic and political engagement, the level of participation among Asian Americans, barriers facing this population, and future trends. Although the respondents are not a random representative sample of typical Asian Americans, their responses nonetheless provide insight into what Asian Americans think about civic and political engagement.

Like the literature on the topic, individuals have broad and wide ranging definitions of civic engagement. Stakeholders most frequently defined civic engagement through community involvement in settings such as schools, community organizations, churches, and government institutions. Some specifically mentioned involvement on a voluntary basis; others were vague about whether the involvement should be voluntary or could be paid. Stakeholders often distinguished between individual and institutional engagement. Individual engagement includes knowledge gathering activities, such as discussing politics and following current events, as well as action oriented activities, such as voting, volunteering, serving on a jury, or running for public office. Institutional engagement occurs when organizations engage with government, politicians, or other decision makers on behalf of constituents or interests.

The survey responses did not provide much insight into unique forms of engagement in the Asian American community or unique organizational or institutional avenues in which engagement takes place. Although stakeholders were not detailed in their answers, we believe that engagement can have a cultural dimension that makes it unique. Engagement can also take the form of a unique organizational or collective effort. Within the Asian American community,

unique organizational engagement happens through independent organizations that serve the Asian American community. Other types of organizational engagement involve Asian American branches of mainstream organizations, such as the Bar Association or the Chamber of Commerce.

Stakeholders had more to say about general barriers to civic engagement. Cultural barriers were cited most often and survey answers leaned toward a narrower discussion of barriers to political engagement rather than a broader discussion of barriers to civic engagement. Apathy, which can take the form of passive indifference or active refusal to take action, was often cited as an initial barrier. The latter is most evident among those who distrust the U.S. political system. A lack of access to information about the political process and current events was also frequently mentioned as a significant barrier to engagement. This can result from a lack of available materials in a particular language, lack of access to the Internet or other sources of information, and lack of educational outreach by community organizations.

Some barriers suggested by stakeholders are particular to different populations. For low-income individuals struggling to make ends meet, political and civic engagement is often perceived as a luxury that takes resources, such as time and money, away from basic needs and responsibilities. For these individuals, the opportunity cost is too high to warrant their engagement. Elderly and disabled populations lack mobility to participate in activities that require traveling. People of color and immigrants can be dissuaded from political and civic engagement activities after encountering racism in the process, not to mention the other forms of prejudice that can deter participation among a variety of populations.

Within communities and organizations, a lack of intergenerational mentors and role models can limit engagement opportunities for new individuals or groups. Even if role models do exist and knowledge sharing takes place, established or entrenched leadership—in government, on boards, and among high-level staff—can also limit leadership opportunities and engagement, particularly among the young, immigrants, and others that are not currently represented in leadership roles.

When asked about specific barriers to engagement in the Asian American community, stakeholders discussed some of the barriers already mentioned, but in a more nuanced way. One person pointed out that for Asian immigrants or those with close ties to their country of origin, the corrupt political system of their home country may lead to a distrust of politics that dissuades engagement in U.S. politics. As another person put it, "I believe that culturally among Asians there's a certain amount of cynicism about how much the political system can do for them." And while people of color collectively face significant barriers to political and civic engagement due to individual prejudices and institutional racism, yet another person felt that Asian Americans sometimes experience more subtle forms of racism than Blacks and Latinos.

Language was the most frequently cited barrier to engagement in the Asian American community. Language barriers between the Asian American community and other communities, as well as language barriers between different Asian American ethnic groups, create significant challenges for engagement by and within the Asian American community. A lack of media coverage about important political and policy issues, especially within the Asian American ethnic media, was also cited as a huge barrier to accessing knowledge to inform political and civic participation. Stakeholders acknowledged that the complexity of the Asian American community can also make it difficult to find a unifying message that engages and mobilizes the entire community. Diversity can lead to divisions between and within Asian American ethnic groups which undermine not only political and civic engagement activities but also the very notion of a unified Asian American community.

Because Asian Americans sometimes experience, as one stakeholder put it, a "reluctance to speak up/speak out based on cultural norms," political and civic engagement activities are sometimes incompatible with the cultural norms of a particular Asian American ethnic community. Spending time and money on such activities may conflict with cultural values or expectations to share those resources with family. The insular nature of some Asian American ethnic communities may also dissuade civic engagement activities that reach outside one's own community.

Looking forward, stakeholders were asked about specific ways to facilitate greater civic and political engagement in the Asian American community. At an individual level, they felt that civic engagement within the community could be facilitated through improved media education via television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. Opportunities for skills building and leadership development, perhaps through increased participation on volunteer boards, would also heighten civic engagement. Additionally, individuals could promote engagement by helping to leverage financial resources for nonprofit organizations and political campaigns and parties. Boosting voter registration and participation among Asian Americans is an obvious way to increase political engagement, and stakeholders felt it would likely be associated with more Asian Americans running for, and getting elected to, public office.

Ultimately, stakeholders felt that civic engagement would increase if the Asian American community mobilized around a common platform seeking visible, sustainable outcomes. Such a platform should be built around an understanding of a common problem and a common solution and would be, according to one stakeholder, "so compelling that it overcomes cultural norms not conducive to civic engagement" in the Asian American community. Yet, as another said, the challenge is "getting folks to find value in shared heritage and culture."

When discussing best practices in Asian American civic engagement, stakeholders did not distinguish between organizations that simply offer opportunities to volunteer and organizations that actively promote civic engagement, such as referral organizations for volunteers to connect with organizations that need assistance or groups that promote political engagement through voter registration While there are a number of mainstream groups that fulfill this function, it is unclear whether an Asian American organization has sprung up to fill this void in the community.

Stakeholders also touched on arenas for engagement outside of community organizations. College campus-based organizations, while typically more social in nature than community-based groups, were also mentioned as an important site for Asian American civic engagement. Business community activities through the Asian Amer-

ican Chamber of Commerce and Asian American media programs were also mentioned. Conferences and summits were discussed as another important venue for networking and information gathering to increase civic engagement in the community.

Most stakeholders were hopeful that political and civic engagement would increase in the Asian American community over the next 10-20 years. They acknowledged that engagement would depend on shifting demographics, such as age and immigration. They hoped to see more Asian Americans running for elected office, more Asian Americans donating to political campaigns, and higher Asian American voter turnouts. To achieve this, they felt it is not only important to build leadership capacity and raise awareness within the Asian American community, but that it is also essential for the community to strengthen cross-cultural collaborations and alliances with other communities.